



[Alexandra Kollontai, 1872-1952](#)

No Woman Question?

The proletarian revolution is inconceivable without the involvement of the more than 50% of the population which is female. Bourgeois feminism cannot lead women towards proletarian revolution. Resolution of the contradictions that oppress women cannot be achieved under capitalism. These are the general and compelling circumstance that motivates this course, No Woman, No Revolution.

[Alexandra Kollontai](#) understood the limits of bourgeois feminism very well. In 1908 she wrote:

“The [bourgeois] feminists seek equality in the framework of the existing class society, in no way do they attack the basis of this society.” (The full document is attached and the download is linked below).

“Where, then, is that general ‘woman question’? Where is that unity of tasks and aspirations about which the feminists have so much to say? A sober glance at reality shows that such unity does not and cannot exist,” wrote Kollontai.

“The feminists declare themselves to be on the side of social reform, and some of them even say they are in favour of socialism — in the far distant future, of course — but they are not intending to struggle in the ranks of the working class for the realisation of these aims. The best of them believe, with a naive sincerity, that once the deputies’ seats are within their reach they will be able to cure the social sores which have in their view developed because men, with their inherent egoism, have been masters of the situation. However good the intentions of individual groups of feminists towards the proletariat, whenever the question of class struggle has been posed they have left the battlefield in a fright. They find that they do not wish to interfere in alien causes, and prefer to retire to their bourgeois liberalism which is so comfortably familiar,” says Kollontai.

Kollontai was writing at the height of modern feminism’s first blooming, at the time of the [“Suffragette”](#) campaigns for votes for women in capitalist countries, which votes [hardly](#)

existed at the time. Kollontai published her pamphlet “The Social Basis of the Woman Question” (attached) in 1909.

Kollontai saw two camps. In one camp were the feminists, who from Kollontai’s point of view were bourgeois feminists, by definition. In the other camp were women who were proletarian, or else partisans of the proletariat. She distinguished between these two camps as follows:

“However apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that fundamental transformation of the contemporary economic and social structure of society without which the liberation of women cannot be complete.

“If in certain circumstances the short-term tasks of women of all classes coincide, the final aims of the two camps, which in the long term determine the direction of the movement and the tactics to be used, differ sharply. While for the feminists the achievement of equal rights with men in the framework of the contemporary capitalist world represents a sufficiently concrete end in itself, equal rights at the present time are, for the proletarian women, only a means of advancing the struggle against the economic slavery of the working class. The feminists see men as the main enemy, for men have unjustly seized all rights and privileges for themselves, leaving women only chains and duties. For them a victory is won when a prerogative previously

enjoyed exclusively by the male sex is conceded to the 'fair sex'.

"Proletarian women have a different attitude. They do not see men as the enemy and the oppressor; on the contrary, they think of men as their comrades, who share with them the drudgery of the daily round and fight with them for a better future. The woman and her male comrade are enslaved by the same social conditions; the same hated chains of capitalism oppress their will and deprive them of the joys and charms of life. It is true that several specific aspects of the contemporary system lie with double weight upon women, as it is also true that the conditions of hired labour sometimes turn working women into competitors and rivals to men. But in these unfavourable situations, the working class knows who is guilty."

"The working woman is first and foremost a member of the working class."

Having thus strongly made her fundamental case, Kollontai proceeds to discuss "Marriage and the Problem of the Family". This is where, as Frederick Engels had noted a quarter of a century before Kollontai in his "[Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State](#)", capitalism corresponds to the oppression of women, arising from the ancient history of property, still continuing in the present time.

Engels demonstrated that the form of marriage in any society

had always coincided with the relations of production. Kollontai, discussing the work of the bourgeois feminist Ellen Key, comes to the point of asking, in the second of the two following paragraphs: “Does the family wither away?”

“Ellen Key’s devotion to the obligations of maternity and the family forces her to give an assurance that the isolated family unit will continue to exist even in a society transformed along socialist lines. The only change, as she sees it, will be that all the attendant elements of convenience or of material gain will be excluded from the marriage union, which will be concluded according to mutual inclinations, without rituals or formalities — love and marriage will be truly synonymous. But the isolated family unit is the result of the modern individualistic world, with its rat-race, its pressures, its loneliness; the family is a product of the monstrous capitalist system. And yet Key hopes to bequeath the family to socialist society! Blood and kinship ties at present often serve, it is true, as the only support in life, as the only refuge in times of hardship and misfortune. But will they be morally or socially necessary in the future? Key does not answer this question. She has too loving a regard for the “ideal family”, this egoistic unit of the middle bourgeoisie to which the devotees of the bourgeois structure of society look with such reverence.

“But it is not only the talented though erratic Ellen Key who loses her way in the social contradictions. There is probably no other question about which socialists themselves are so little in agreement as the question of

marriage and the family. Were we to try and organise a survey among socialists, the results would most probably be very curious. Does the family wither away? or are there grounds for believing that the family disorders of the present are only a transitory crisis? Will the present form of the family be preserved in the future society, or will it be buried with the modern capitalist system? These are questions which might well receive very different answers. ...”

Kollontai answers her own questions, thus:

“...the social influences are so complex and their interactions so diverse that it is impossible to foretell what the relationships of the future, when the whole system has fundamentally been changed, will be like.

“...ritual marriage and the compulsive isolated family are doomed to disappear.”

To finish, Kollontai returns to the class question and the conflict of interest between the proletarian and the bourgeois feminists.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The Social Basis of the Woman Question, Kollontai, 1909.](#)
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